

## Making the Leap to an Overseas Role

In today's increasingly globalised pharmaceutical industry a spell working "overseas" is becoming a necessary part of a high-flying career. Many international pharmaceutical companies are organised into three major regions; the Americas, Asia Pacific and EMEA (Europe Middle East and Africa). You should probably aim to work in the USA plus at least one other region: looking forward perhaps time in India, China or Latin America might be especially relevant.

So if you are ambitious to succeed and if you want to control anything bigger than a domestic department, you should find a way to plan time abroad into your career. These are big "ifs", and in a world where work life balance is regaining its rightful importance there is no shame in putting personal satisfaction or family objectives ahead of career success.

In an age of teleconferences and the "global village", why should the locations you have worked in affect your career progression? There are many different reasons – all boiling down to issue of risk and knowledge.

Before giving you regional authority, top management will need to believe that you will make them look good and that you will improve the operation for which they're ultimately accountable. To minimise their risk you need to know how to operate in the region. This might be on the basis of experience as an Executive Assistant to a Regional Vice President or as General Manager in one of the region's component countries.

That way you will have gained the necessary cultural sensitivity and organisational knowledge to know how to ask which questions in the region, based on experience on the ground, preferably learned directly from watching successful people doing their jobs there. So, if you are offered that kind of job, you should interpret it as both a vote of confidence and a test.

### **What functions gain the most value through overseas assignments?**

My answer may sound a bit glib: overseas assignments add the most value when they enhance both your career development and your company's plans for you. Examples include:

- General Management – a company will often offer a first GM job in a smaller market. This is often a way of allowing you to practice in a place where your mistakes will hurt the company less than in your home territory or at Headquarters.
- Research and Development – leadership roles away from home are usually a way of helping you to

**RSA**  
The Melon Ground  
Hatfield Park  
Hatfield  
Herts AL9 5NB

telephone  
+44 (0)1707 259333

facsimile  
+44 (0)1707 271366

email  
[enquiries@theRSAgroup.com](mailto:enquiries@theRSAgroup.com)

web  
[www.theRSAgroup.com](http://www.theRSAgroup.com)



understand the cultural differences you'll have to manage when you're in general management. Centres of excellence may offer you a way to keep a job that is relevant to your experience or interest. Sometimes there will also be an implementation or trouble shooting agenda: for example one person I know was placed in a country to fire a whole department and expatriate it – a job very few local managers would have agreed to do.

- Medical and Clinical Development where ICH has effectively globalised process, so that really the only way you can progress your career is to move to a global or regional HQ. If these are not in your home country you'll need to move away in order to move up.
- Marketing – increasingly a global discipline, with the most senior people at Headquarters – to be in charge you need to be there.
- Manufacturing – a move to a low cost (Puerto Rico, India) or high tax relief (Ireland) territory is often the only way to gain the hands-on plant management experience you'll need to rise to the top.

#### **When is the best time to move?**

The timing issue is the one where your company's interests are most likely to conflict with yours.

For top management, the best time is when they've had a chance to see you through a number of roles, to be sure about your ability and commitment and to have planned a career path for you: five years at least.

For most people joining as (post) graduates, this is about the same time that they settle down and start to make major commitments to other people: partners, children, mortgage lenders, etc. So there's going to have to be a trade-off between lifestyle and career progression. You may have to ask your partner or family to make sacrifices.

The offer of an international posting will either mean that you've been noticed by your current company or that your value has been recognised by a new one. Either way you'll need to reorganise a lot of things and to understand why you're moving, what the risks are and what you're going to do if it all goes pear-shaped.

#### **What are the risks and benefits?**

The benefits of international assignments are individual to you. One obvious (and hopefully intended) benefit is that it will broaden your exposure in your company accelerating and improving your career development. Another is experience of new cultures. Try working in China: unbelievable! But at the end of the day what you get out of your time overseas is up to you. You'll get more

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Hatfield  
Herts AL9 5NB

telephone  
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facsimile  
+44 (0)1707 271366

email  
[enquiries@theRSAgroup.com](mailto:enquiries@theRSAgroup.com)

web  
[www.theRSAgroup.com](http://www.theRSAgroup.com)



out if you a) plan well and b) put lots in.

Last, a word of warning: if your partner is not behind your move and wholeheartedly supportive you are in more trouble than you think. And while on this subject, if you decide to turn down the assignment be very thoughtful and positive in how you do it. After all, you're effectively telling your management that they were wrong to make the offer.

**Secondment or permanent move?**

It depends.

The big advantage of a secondment is that it's usually for a fixed period and with a guaranteed job to come home to. The main down side is that your new colleagues might see you as less committed and not a real part of the team.

A permanent move requires real commitment from you and from those close to you and unless you negotiate a very good deal, it will not have a parachute attached to it. In this case if things go wrong, you may well find yourself not only out of a job but stuck in a foreign country with no visa and no home to return to.

**To conclude.**

Overseas roles are part and parcel of most star careers in the pharmaceutical industry. They're not the best moves for many people and require significant commitment and planning. So if you want to reach for the pharma stars – go for it. But plan carefully, speak openly with your employer and (more importantly) your loved ones, be prepared to make compromises and once you've decided to do it, throw yourself in wholeheartedly and enjoy the ride.

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Hatfield Park  
Hatfield  
Herts AL9 5NB

telephone  
+44 (0)1707 259333

facsimile  
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web  
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